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## Scriptures in Early Christianity

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# SCRIPTURES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Outi Lehtipuu and Hanne von Weissenberg

What did early Christians conceive of as scripture? What texts did they read and use? Who read and used them? How were the books that are now included in the biblical canon chosen? Finding answers to these questions is challenging, not least because of the scarcity of evidence, particularly on the earliest times. Even though scriptures assumed a constitutive role for Jesus' followers from the beginning and early Christian writers constantly appealed to authoritative texts, there is surprisingly little discussion on what actual books were regarded as scripture before the fourth century. It is only then when the term *kanōn* starts to be used in the meaning of a list of normative books (Metzger 1987: 289–293).

Another challenge has to do with perspective: it is not easy to approach the question of early Jewish or Christian scriptures without having in mind the closed canon familiar to scholars today (Brakke 2012: 266–267; Najman 2012: 497–518.). This means that historians tend to read sources from within the framework of a fixed list of scriptures and evaluate how close to the ultimate goal, the closed canon, each piece of evidence arrives (Mroczek 2015).

Historically this kind of a teleological design is problematic – using a standard which did not exist prior to the fourth century does not do justice to earlier sources. The same goes with nomenclature (Ulrich 2002a; Zahn 2011). It makes little sense to speak of 'canonical' and 'non-canonical' texts in a situation where there was no canon. Moreover, a distinction between canonical and non-canonical too often entails a value judgment: only those texts that became accepted as part of the canon are considered important while those that were not can be dismissed as worthless (Dunderberg 2015: 94–95; Najman 2012: 497–501). Investigation of the rich evidence of the Dead Sea discoveries, providing scholars with the earliest biblical manuscripts and scriptural interpretation, has made it clear that in a period during which there

is no Bible as a concept, no book format and no printing culture, ‘post-canonical’ features such as textual stability and a collection with boundaries are not constitutive for sacred texts (Mroczek 2015). Similarly, comparative study of various religious traditions has shown that the role scripture plays in many present-day Christian and other Western religious communities is not universal and cannot be applied when studying religious traditions of different cultures and times. Instead of books, it may be myths, symbols, rituals etc. that are the primary carriers of religious authority (Levering 1989).

Our starting point in this chapter is the diversity of the early Christian movement. One sign of this diversity is a broad range of different approaches to scripture. Not all Christians read and esteemed the same texts and used them in the same way. Even though there was a wide agreement on the authority of the Jewish ‘law and prophets’ early on, it is not always clear which textual compositions or which textual forms these concepts entailed. And even though most Christians would have read Paul’s letters and one or more gospels, there were exceptions, too. Marcion became famous for rejecting the traditional scriptures that were to be known as the Old Testament and for accepting only one *evangelion* (presumably an edited version of the Gospel of Luke) and ten letters of Paul (BeDuhn 2013). For most Christian teachers, Paul was a great authority and they saw themselves as the (only) rightful heirs of the apostolic legacy, fiercely attacking their rivals and accusing them of misunderstanding Paul (Lehtipuu 2015: 87–90; Lieu 2010a). However, some early Christians considered him as an enemy to true Christian belief, and opinions about him varied from acclaim to scorn (Lieu 2010b; Bird & Dodson 2011).

Historical inquiry of early Christian scriptures cannot be restricted to writings that later acquired a canonical status. Nor is canonicity an apt distinctive feature in a practical sense, for in many cases there is no more information about where, by whom and for whom the earliest Christian texts were written, be their later status ‘canonical’ or ‘non-canonical.’ As far as reception history is concerned, many of the ‘canonical’ texts such as the four New Testament gospels and Paul’s letters were widely read and quoted, but this is not a characteristic shared by all texts in our canon. For example, the letters of James, Jude and 2–3 John do not feature any more frequently in early Christian literature than do ‘non-canonical’ texts such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle of Barnabas* or the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Some of these latter texts were included in some of the earliest manuscripts of the New

Testament, which means that there were Christians who regarded them as ‘canonical’, though they are no longer in our New Testament canon.

In what follows, it is impossible to discuss all relevant texts in detail. Instead, we give an overview of the diversity of scriptures in early Christianity. In our discussion, we stick to the customary distinction between ‘scriptures’, that is, religiously authoritative texts, and ‘canon’, that is, a fixed list of a selection of scripture (Brakke 2012: 264; McDonald & Sanders 2002; Sundberg 1968). We confine the use of the word ‘canon’ to the discussions of the fourth century when this term begins to be used in the sense of a decisive list of the texts of the Old and the New Testament. We also distinguish between authoritative texts and scripture (cf. Ulrich 2002a: 29–30) and take the former as a broader term; i.e. ‘scripture’ refers to texts that are regarded as sacred while other texts can also convey authority. For example, when Paul, according to the book of Acts, cites the Greek poet Aratus (Acts 17:28), it is not likely that he (or Luke) considered the poet’s text as ‘scripture.’ Similarly, it is not easy to determine what kind of a status the *Book of Enoch* had for the author of the Epistle of Jude who quotes it (Jude v. 14). Our use of terminology coheres with the change in preferred vocabulary especially among Dead Sea scrolls scholars: instead of ‘biblical’ or ‘canonical’, scholars have begun to use terms such as ‘authoritative’, ‘sacred’, or ‘S/scriptural’ (preferably with a lower case s) for texts that were gradually gaining a ‘special’ status in the late Second Temple Judaism. This change in vocabulary has its roots in the attempt to acknowledge the pre-canonical state of textual instability and the lack of a fixed collection, a Bible in the canonical sense of the word.

We set the scene by describing the earliest pandects, that is, manuscripts containing the complete Bible, which originate from the fourth and fifth centuries. It was in this period that the ‘canon debates’ (cf. McDonald & Sanders 2002), discussions of the limits of the Bible, were conducted. Canon formation was to a large extent part of early Christian polemics; texts were accepted as authoritative scripture and others were rejected ‘to protect and project orthodoxy against what [were] perceived as the wild assertions of heresy’ (Brooke 1997: 242). To understand the fourth century debates, we trace earlier developments and scriptural phenomena. As we understand the development of early Judaism and early Christianity as more or less contemporaneous processes, we discuss what can be known of the emergence of Jewish scriptures, especially in the light of Qumran discoveries. The Qumran evidence and New Testament texts share many similarities in the way they understand scripture and together

they shed light on the scriptures of the earliest Jesus-followers. We continue by considering a variety of texts produced by early Christians: gospels, epistles, and other texts, and raise the question of their readership. We conclude with some observations concerning the formation of the Christian canon.

## THE FIRST BIBLES: FOURTH/FIFTH CENTURY

Around the year 330, according to Eusebius, the emperor Constantine ordered fifty copies of ‘the holy scriptures’ (*tōn theinōn graphōn*) to be produced on parchment in a portable form and delivered to Constantinople (*Vit. Const.* 4.36). What does this imperial order tell us? First, its scope was enormous. A codex including all of ‘the holy scriptures’ would require a huge amount of animal hides for the production of vellum, numerous proficient scribes, and a lot of time (Kraft 2007: 10–11). Second, the order raises the question of why it was needed. Did the churches in Constantinople possess no scriptures? Or did the emperor want to make sure that all churches have the same scriptures? Why did he not indicate what the ‘holy scriptures’ are – did he not know or did he not care? Did he let Eusebius decide? In this case, would Revelation have been included – the book of whose status Eusebius himself seems to be uncertain (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.2, 4). Did all fifty codices contain the same texts? It is not possible to answer this question, for it is unlikely that any of these copies has survived. Even though the two oldest codices that encompass the whole Bible are from the fourth century, scholars tend to be skeptical whether either one of them belonged to those produced upon the imperial request (Metzger & Ehrman 2005: 15–16).

Be that as it may, when these two codices, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, together with a third early Bible, the fifth century Codex Alexandrinus are compared, their contents show similarities but also striking differences. In terms of the Old Testament, Vaticanus lacks 1–4 Maccabees, included in the other two, while Alexandrinus also contains Psalm 151. The order of the books also varies significantly (see the chart in McDonald 2007: 442). In all three, the New Testament opens with the four Gospels but there is considerable variation among the rest of the books both in terms of the works included and their order. In Sinaiticus, the Gospels are followed by fourteen letters of Paul (Hebrews is included and placed between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy), after which come Acts, the seven catholic epistles and Revelation. Moreover, Sinaiticus also includes two other early Christian texts, the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Codex Alexandrinus places the book of Acts after the

Gospel of John but then come the catholic epistles before the 14 letters of Paul and the book of Revelation. Here, too, more texts follow: *1–2 Clement* and the *Psalms of Solomon*. The order of the books in Codex Vaticanus is the same as in Alexandrinus but the end of the manuscript is lost from the middle of Hebrews onward (Smith 2014). It is not known whether the missing texts of 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Revelation belonged to the original, and what other texts might have been included.

These three great codices are exceptions among biblical manuscripts. Not only are they the oldest Greek codices to contain the complete Bible, they are also the only full Bibles before the twelfth century (Kraft 2007: 11, n. 21). Before they were produced in the fourth and fifth centuries, and centuries after that, most texts were copied and circulated either individually or as part of a smaller collection, either on scrolls or, to an ever increasing extent, in codices. This had to do with physical limitations, for it was not practical to increase the size of a scroll endlessly. After the adoption of the codex form, more text could be included in one manuscript, but it was not until the fourth century that volumes large enough to encompass all biblical texts could be produced. Until that time (and beyond), the ‘Bible’ was a collection of separate scrolls or codices – as is indicated by the name *biblia*, Greek for ‘scrolls’ (plural). It is clear that there was variation in regard to what scriptures early Christian communities possessed, for different communities had different collections of separate manuscripts at their disposal.

The book-like format also raised the discussion about canonicity to a new level, for it made it necessary to determine what texts should be copied in between the front and the back cover and what should be left out (Ulrich 2002a: 25). The afore-mentioned three great codices show that even though there was a general agreement on most of the texts, some fluctuation persisted in regard to the selection of books and to their order. Local variation concerning the order of the books and the contents continued for the entire period when copying was made by hand. As a matter of fact, no complete unanimity was ever reached. The canons of Christian churches still differ from each other, especially in regard to the question of what books are counted among the Old Testament scriptures (see the diagrams, e.g., in McDonald 2007: 443–444.)

The manuscript tradition shows that there is no unambiguous answer to the question of what texts early Christians conceived as scripture. Texts such as *1 Clement*, *Barnabas*, the

*Shepherd of Hermas* and *Didache* were in some circles regarded canonical and judged from the sheer number of survived manuscripts, they seemed to have been more popular than some of the writings eventually included in the New Testament canon (Gamble 2002: 290).

Moreover, sometimes texts that were later canonized were bound in codices together with texts that did not receive a canonical status. A striking example is the third or fourth century papyrus P<sup>72</sup> which contains not only the earliest known copy of 1–2 Peter and Jude but also the *Protevangelium of James* (entitled *Nativity of Mary*, *Apocalypse of James* in the manuscript), the apocryphal correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians (3 *Corinthians*), the eleventh *Ode of Solomon*, Melito's *Homily on the Passover*, an otherwise unknown hymn fragment, the *Apology of Phileas* and Psalms 33 and 34 (Charlesworth 2012). This case suggests that texts that later made it into the canon (Jude, 1–2 Peter) were not always treated differently from other early Christian texts but nothing definitive can be said about the level of authority granted to any of these texts.

## **THE JEWISH 'BIBLE' IN THE LATE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD**

Contrary to what is commonly assumed, the first Christians did not inherit a ready-made Bible from Judaism. Rather, in light of the Dead Sea scrolls manuscript evidence, it has become increasingly clear that there was no closed collection of Jewish scriptures in the late Second Temple period. Prior to the Qumran discoveries, there were some indirect indicators to a developing collection, such as in the prologue of the Greek Book of Sirach (c. 135 BCE), which refers to 'the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors...', and the Gospel of Luke (first century CE) reference to 'the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms...' (Luke 24:44). The first numerical references to authoritative texts are also found in the first century. Josephus mentions twenty two ancestral books (*Contra Apionem* 1.8) and *Fourth Ezra* refers to twenty four books (4 *Ezra* 14:44–45). However, rather than references to a closed collection, the numbers are typological in a manner similar to later patristic canon lists (Mroczek 2016: 160–162).

In the late Second Temple period, there were various, still ongoing canonical processes or developments within Judaism. These are expressed, e.g., by the Greek translations of the separate books of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), created gradually between the third and the first centuries BCE, and by the so-called biblical manuscripts of the Qumran library. Comparison of the scriptural scrolls from the Judean Desert with Septuagint

manuscripts and Josephus' rewriting of biblical history has demonstrated that parallel recensions of biblical books were in circulation in Judea, as well as the diaspora, at least until 100 CE (Ulrich 2002b). Further, the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that this was a period of flourishing literary activity. From a magnitude of textual material that was authored, edited, and transmitted, only some texts eventually became part of the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Old Testament canon. Other authoritative texts of the Second Temple period never gained a place in the final collection. Moreover, not all texts that now are a part of the biblical canon were necessarily considered authoritative, or inspired, when first composed (Ulrich 2003: 4–6). Importantly, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible or the Dead Sea Scrolls, are texts explicitly referred to as 'sacred.' As a matter of fact, in Jewish texts, written in Hebrew (Aramaic), the earliest explicit references to 'sacred texts / books' (*kitvei qodesh*) are attested in Rabbinic literature (e.g., m. Šabb. 13:1, m. Yad. 3:2, 5; 4:6; t. Šabb. 16:1). It is in the Greek texts, written by Josephus (37–100 CE) and Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE) where we find a variety of Greek terms referring to sacred writings, usually to the Torah (Bremmer 2010: 340–341).

In the Qumran texts, there are occasional references to 'the Law' or 'the Law and the Prophets', but what exactly these categories entail is not defined (Ulrich 2015: 300–304). For instance, Daniel was counted among the prophets, but we do not know with certainty which books exactly were included in 'the Prophets' in the late Second Temple period (Berthelot 2006). There is no detailed, explicit list of authoritative texts; instead, there are other, commonly agreed criteria to be looked at. For the purpose of defining authoritative Jewish literature, both the number of preserved manuscripts and the secondary use of these texts in later compositions are indicative. The secondary usage includes both explicit exegesis of earlier, authoritative sources, sometimes identified by the formula 'it is written', and the more implicit intertextuality expressed in rewriting of source texts (i.e. the *Temple Scroll*). Through these indicators we can figure out tentatively what texts might have been authoritative for the Yahad movement (Ulrich 2015: 304–308). Assumedly, these findings have broader relevance in relations to other Jewish groups, too, even though we know little about their preferences, with the well-known exception of the Samaritans, who regarded only the Torah as authoritative.

There is a consensus that the Torah had already gained a widely accepted and authoritative status in Judaism during the late Second Temple period. The importance of the Torah is visible



in all the findings of the Dead Sea area (Judean desert) (Tov 2002: 141). This is also indicated by the Greek translation of the Pentateuch. Regardless of the authority of the Torah, the existence of the many rewritten forms of (parts of) the Pentateuchal text in Hebrew, such as the Rewritten Pentateuch manuscripts, raises questions about wherein exactly the authority lies – probably more in the book or in the tradition than in the text or its actual wording. Textual fluidity holds true for several other biblical books in the late Second Temple period, too. The existence of parallel versions shows that the authoritative traditions are represented in a plural form at least for some parts, and the ancient scribes dealt with this reality in a variety of ways (Brooke 2005: 103).

The Psalms, Isaiah, and at least some of the Minor Prophets were very likely authoritative as well (for the XII see von Weissenberg, 2012). Books that were later rejected from the Jewish canon but which appear to have been authoritative for the Yahad movement include texts such as *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*. The evidence is much weaker for many other compositions, suggesting a non-authoritative status for them, even though there is more diversity of scholarly opinion concerning these texts. Later canonical books that are often listed as being not authoritative for the Qumran community include Canticles, Qohelet, Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles (Lange 2002: 22–24; Ulrich 2015: 308). The most likely reason for the rejection of the book of Esther, of which no manuscripts are found in Qumran, was a theological one, related to the Qumranic festival calendar, which has no reference to Purim. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that while Proverbs and Qohelet apparently were not authoritative for the Qumran community, several previously unknown wisdom texts (Instruction 1Q26; 4Q415–418, 418a, 418c, 423; Mysteries 1Q27; 4Q299–301; Beatitudes 4Q525, etc.) were found in the Qumran caves. The probable absence of Chronicles at Qumran may reflect the negative attitude of the Yahad movement towards the contemporary practices in the Temple and the political agenda of the Hasmoneans (Brooke 2007: 35–48). If this interpretation of the data is correct, in this case at least, the rejection of certain books was related to issues of identity.

## **JEWISH SCRIPTURES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

The Qumran evidence highlights the fact that the Hebrew Bible was still in the making during the time of the Jesus movement. Some scriptural texts enjoyed a clearly authoritative and sacred status that the first Christians would have inherited from Judaism, whereas with others,

the jury was still out. In Judaism, the discussion continued with certain texts such as Qohelet, Song of Songs and Ben Sira long into the rabbinic era as attested by the Mishnah and Talmud (m. Yad. 3:5, 4:6; t. Yad. 2:13). The earliest extant Hebrew codices including all canonical texts date to the medieval times. Early Christian texts reinforce both the picture of the scriptural status of some texts and the vagueness of the limits of scripture. In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus is presented as reading (Luke 4:16–17) and citing (e.g., Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 21:13, 42) from literature that was to become part of the Old Testament. The introductory formula ‘it is written’ and similar phrases reveal the authority given to these texts. Indeed, the Gospels reflect the conviction that God speaks through scriptures; ‘have you not read what was spoken to you by God’ says Jesus, according to Matthew, and cites Exodus (Matt. 22:31–32). Jesus commonly refers to ‘the law and prophets’ (Matt. 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; cf. ‘Moses and the prophets’ in Luke 16:29, 31). Strikingly, however, the *Gospel of Thomas* presents a Jesus who does not even once refer to scriptures or to any of such heroes of the past as Moses or Abraham. On the contrary, in *Thomas* Jesus dismisses the authority of Jewish prophets (Gos. Thom. 52).

In the Qumran materials, in light of both manuscript evidence and exegetical use, the most important biblical books were Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms (Brooke 2007: 93–96). Correspondingly, most frequently cited texts in the New Testament Gospels are Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah and other prophets. On the other hand, several Old Testament texts are not alluded to at all in the New testament, such as Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Haggai or Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes and Esther (Evans 2002: 185). Here, again comparison with the Qumran discoveries is instructive: whereas Habakkuk and Nahum have their own commentaries (1QpHab, 4QpNah), the others are poorly attested, both as manuscripts and as sources for later interpretation.

It is likely that early Christians collected key scriptural texts as proof-texts (the so-called *testimonia*) and arranged them topically to use in their proclamation (Gamble 1995: 25–28; Albl 1999). The phrase ‘it is written’ or the like occurs more than sixty times in the New Testament writings. Matthew’s Gospel in particular reflects the idea that the events of Jesus’ birth and life fulfil the words of prophets (cf. Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:35.) Isaiah’s song of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53) was early on interpreted as a prophecy of Jesus’ sufferings (cf. Acts 8:26–35). Other popular methods included reading scriptural narratives in a typological way (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Cor. 15:21–23) and

understanding Israel's patriarchs, prophets, kings and other key figures as forerunners and examples of the Christian faith (cf. Rom. 4:1–3; Hebrews 11). Interpretations and rewritings around key biblical figures such as Abraham are also attested in several rewritten scripture compositions found among the Dead Sea scrolls (e.g., *Genesis Apocryphon*, *4QMidrash on Eschatology*).

The authority and divine origin of Hebrew scriptures were usually taken for granted – although the expression ‘holy scriptures’ occurs only twice within New Testament texts (Rom. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:15). One of the few exceptions to this rule was Marcion in the second century who sought to separate Christianity from its Jewish past and rejected Hebrew scriptures altogether. In addition, Paul already added nuances to what the ‘divine’ origin meant for Christians, for instance, by arguing that the Mosaic law was ‘ordained through angels by a mediator’ (Gal. 3:19). However, most early Christian writers continued to use Jewish scriptures side by side with texts produced by Christians. For example, several Nag Hammadi texts include retellings of the Genesis myth of creation (*Ap. John* 19,4–33; *Nat. Rulers* 88,11–17; *Orig. World* 114,36–116,8; *Apoc. Adam* 66,14–25; *Testim. Truth* 45,21–49,15). The vagueness of the boundaries of scripture is seen in the fact that many early Christians read and used a broad variety of Jewish religious texts. Most of the texts traditionally classified in scholarship as ‘pseudepigrapha’ were copied, edited and transmitted by Christians (de Jonge 2003; Davila 2005).

## **THE EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES**

The beginnings of Christian literature are no longer traceable. Although scholars have assumed that New Testament letters include quotations of prayers, hymns, creeds and other liturgical materials (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3–5; Gal. 3:28; Phil. 2:6–11), it is hard to evaluate whether these circulated in a written or only in an oral form. In the case of the New Testament Gospels, their literary interdependence is evident, and the majority view of Marcan priority seems to be the least problematic of all proposed theories. How much Mark and the compiler of an early collection of Jesus’ sayings (‘Q’) had written traditions of Jesus at their disposal and how much they relied on orally transmitted stories, is not easy to determine.

It is also hard to determine how and when New Testament texts became scripture for there is no documentation of the early stages. On the one hand, Matthew and Luke use Mark and Q

freely, modifying and reorganizing their contents as they wish. On the other hand, the sheer fact that both later Gospel writers used Mark and Q independently and most probably in different geographical locations, suggests that these two earlier texts circulated widely and were publicly read (Smith 2000: 10). Each evangelist intended to write a complete account of Jesus' words and deeds – they did not think that their Gospels were just one part in a series of four (Kyrtatas 2010: 36). Matthew and Luke probably composed their Gospels to supersede Mark and Q which they found inadequate and several scholars assume that John's Gospel shows the tendency to surpass the synoptic Gospels. All this indicates that the Gospel writers did not acknowledge the work of their peers as scripture.

The authors of New Testament letters were even less likely thinking that what they produced were sacred texts. Paul certainly emphasized his authority in many of his letters and expected that his written instructions were received as authoritative. Even though he thinks highly of his own words, however, he makes a difference between them and the words of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7), the latter ranking no doubt higher than the former. Neither Paul nor any other New Testament letter or Gospel writer appeals to their own divine inspiration when composing the text. The only book where such a claim is made is the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:3, 10–11; 22:7–19; Nicklas 2010).

Both Paul's letters and Gospels began to circulate widely early on and were soon cited as scripture. The earliest references to Paul's letters as scripture appear in the early second century. For example, 2 Peter explicitly juxtaposes Paul's letters with 'other scriptures (*graphai*)' (3:16), and 1 Clement shows that Paul's letter to the Corinthians functions as scripture to him and claims that Paul wrote it 'in spirit' (47:3). At the end of the second century, Irenaeus lists as authoritative all that which 'the prophets announced, the Lord taught, and the apostles delivered' (*Haer.* 1.8.1). However, Irenaeus and other early Christian authors also knew of texts that either they themselves or some other Christians regarded authoritative. In the following, we survey different types of early Christian literature, some of which later became canonical, some of which were left outside.

## **LETTERS OF PAUL**

Paul's letters (to Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians Thessalonians, and to Philemon) were typically addressed to guide and instruct the local congregation he had founded.

Exceptions to this are the letter to the Romans, which was written to a community Paul neither found nor knew very well, and the short letter to Philemon, which is addressed to an individual slave owner. Paul's letters were occasional, that is, they dealt with specific issues in specific communities (Baynes 2010: 96–97), but especially the longer letters such as Romans or 1 Corinthians were carefully composed. The extant letters imply that Paul dictated his letters to a scribe, who wrote them down (Rom. 16:22; cf. 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 5:11; Phlm. 19; Gamble 1995: 95–96). Composing such long letters must have taken time and was likely based on notes and drafts.

In his lifetime, Paul's teaching was not universally accepted and the letters show that he had to struggle for his authority as an apostle. Soon, however, he gained a highly esteemed reputation. An obvious sign of this is the fact that several pseudonymous letters were penned in his name, many of which ended up in the New Testament (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and the so called pastoral epistles: 1–2 Timothy and Titus). Whatever their origin, most of them were universally accepted as Paul's letters; there is no trace that their authenticity was questioned in antiquity. The status of the pastoral epistles may have been an exception as they are missing from some manuscripts. They seem to be the last ones to have been included in the expanding collection of Paul's letters, perhaps simply because they were the last ones to emerge.

Paul's letters were addressed to the whole community and they were meant to be read out loud. This was the case even for the letters to individuals; even though the letter to Philemon is written in second person singular, the greetings at the beginning and end of the letter are in plural. Paul himself probably encouraged the circulation of his letters to other Christian communities. Exchange of letters between Colossae and Laodicea is anticipated in Colossians (3:16), but this may be a fictitious trait since most scholars question Paul's authorship of this letter. Whatever Paul's own role was in the process, his letters were collected and circulated early on. Collecting letters involved editorial activity; someone had to choose what letters to include and in which order (Pervo 2010: 25–30). In the case of Paul, there were several different versions of the Pauline corpus which varied both in regard to contents and to arrangement (Gamble 1995: 58–62, 95–101).

Not all the letters Paul wrote survive. 1 Corinthians refers to a wider correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5:9; 7:1; 2 Cor. 2:4) and he must have written many

other letters, too. It is also possible that some of the surviving letters (2 Corinthians, Philippians) are compilations from earlier ones (Pervo 2010: 38–46). If such editing of Paul's letters took place, it happened early, since there are no manuscripts containing any of the alleged earlier letters. On the other hand, the manuscript evidence shows that editors of the letter collections and copyists felt free to alter the text in several ways. One of their tendencies has to do with the problem of particularity: sometimes the information about the addressees and localities were either omitted or changed to make a letter more universal (Pervo 2010: 30–38).

Paul's letters were well received among most Christian circles. There are several references to them in second century sources. 2 Peter and *1 Clement* were already mentioned above. In addition, in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, which purportedly describes the trial of twelve Christians in North Africa in 180, one of the accused Christians carries 'books and epistles of Paul, a just man' with him. There are several allusions to Paul's letters in texts stemming from Valentinus and his followers found in Nag Hammadi, such as the *Gospel of Truth*, which may originate in the second century (Dunderberg 2015: 149–168). Marcion likewise esteemed Paul. His collection contained ten letters, excluding the pastoral epistles – perhaps because they did not exist yet (BeDuhn 2013: 203–228). Hebrews was often placed in the Pauline collection, especially in the East, even though its Pauline authorship was already doubted in antiquity (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.11–14; Rothschild 2009). Amphilochius, the bishop of Iconium, at the end of the fourth century, refers to such doubts in writing that those who say that Hebrews is spurious are 'not saying well, for the grace is genuine' (Metzger 1987: 212–213, 314). With the inclusion of Hebrews, the Pauline collection contained a total of fourteen letters, which was twice the number seven, a symbol of perfection (Pervo 2010: 37).

Even though the extent of Paul's collected letters varied, the authority of the apostle, conveyed in the letters, was not called into question. Struggles around Paul continued, but the struggle was not so much about whether to accept or dismiss his letters as about who were the rightful interpreters of them (Lehtipuu 2015: 86–94; Bird & Dodson 2011). For example, Irenaeus declares himself to represent the same truth as the apostle, while his rivals deviated from it. In his view, it was necessary to

... explain the apostle and make clear what the heretics who have altogether misunderstood what Paul has said have interpreted differently and to show their foolish

senselessness; and to demonstrate from that same Paul, from whose [writings] they press questions upon us, that they are liars and that the apostle was a preacher of the truth and that everything he taught was in accord with the proclamation of the truth. (*Haer.* 4.41.4, trans. Roberts-Rambaut.)

Paul's authority was also invoked in several other letters ascribed to him (Gregory 2015). A *Letter to the Laodiceans* was composed to provide the readers with the otherwise unknown (and possibly fictive?) letter referred to in Colossians (4:16). The letter, extant in Latin, closely resembles other Pauline letters, especially Philipians. Several early Christian sources mention the letter but it is not certain if all of them refer to the Latin text known to us. According to Tertullian (*Marc.* 5.11.12), Marcion used the name Laodiceans for the letter to Ephesians and he may not have been the only one. Moreover, the reference in Colossians may have inspired several writers to compose letters by that name. The *Letter to the Laodiceans* is found in some Western Latin Bibles, such as the sixth century Codex Fuldensis where the letter is placed after Colossians (Tite 2012).

Another apocryphal letter ascribed to Paul is *3 Corinthians*. The letter circulated both as part of the *Acts of Paul* and independently. In some manuscripts, it bears a title 'Paul to the Corinthians concerning the flesh'. The letter presents itself as Paul's response to an inquiry sent to him by Corinthians. The letter takes a stance in relation to several hotly disputed tenets, such as creation, resurrection and the true humanity of Christ (Webster 2012). *3 Corinthians* is a good example of the fluidity of categories such as 'canonical' and 'apocryphal' for it belonged to the Armenian canon until the nineteenth century, placed after 1 and 2 Corinthians and before Galatians (Hovhannessian 2012).

At the end of the fourth century, Jerome mentions a correspondence between Paul and Seneca that was 'very widely read' (*Vir. ill.* 12.1.) While Jerome took these letters as authentic, their style and contents show that they are later forgeries; some of the letters are even later than others (Pervo 2010: 110–116; Ramelli 2014). Since Jerome does not cite from the letters, it is not quite clear whether the extant Latin texts correspond to those he knew. The alleged correspondence with Paul is the reason why Jerome, somewhat reluctantly, counts Seneca among his list of 'illustrious men.' Neither Jerome nor any other source makes a claim that these letters of Paul should be acknowledged as scripture.

## GOSPELS

Very little is known about the origins and early circulation of the New Testament Gospels. We do not even have secured answers to very basic questions such as who wrote them, where and to whom. All we can say is that they apparently circulated widely and were highly esteemed from the beginning. This early evidence include juxtaposing Gospels with the law and the prophets (Ignatius, Smyrn. 5:1), introducing a Gospel passage with the scriptural formula ‘it is written’ (Barn. 4:14 with reference to Matt. 22:14) and calling a Gospel passage ‘scripture’ (*graphē*; 2 Clem. 2:4).

It is evident that the New Testament Gospels were partly based on earlier written materials. Memories related to Jesus circulated orally but were also grouped together in smaller collections in writing (Schröter 2013: 84–88). Written sources have been postulated even behind the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, and both the preface to Luke’s Gospel and the closing of John’s Gospel attest to the existence of several early accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds (Luke 1:1–4; John 21:25). It was particularly the words of Jesus to which early Christ-followers accorded special authority (Puig i Tàrrach 2016). The earliest reminiscences of Jesus’ teaching are found in the letters of Paul, written before the composition of the Gospels. Sometimes, albeit rather infrequently, Paul quotes ‘the word of the Lord’ (e. g., 1 Cor. 7:10–11; 9:14; 11:23–25), which probably refers to Paul’s received tradition. Another source for receiving Lord’s words, however, was direct revelation in prayer or ecstasy (cf. 2 Cor. 12:3–4, 8–9).

Several second century texts also reflect how Jesus’ sayings were used as authority in instruction and polemic. While many of these references resemble passages in the New Testament gospels, it is not always possible to say whether authors who quoted them knew them as part of a written text or whether they were relying on oral tradition (see, e. g., 1 Clem. 3:1–2; 46:8; *Did.* 8:2; Ptolemy, *Flor.* 3.5–8). These early references also show that Jesus’ words began to function as scripture early on (McDonald 2007: 271–273) – perhaps already before they were written down. Interestingly, second and third century authors sometimes quote Jesus’ words that do not appear in the New Testament gospels (e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.33.3–4; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.10.63; Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 13.2; cf. Acts 20:35). These *agrapha*, sayings ascribed to Jesus that do not appear in the New Testament gospels,



are sometimes identified as part of a Gospel, but some of them might have been known in oral form only (Frey 2015: 18–19).

The gospels were composed as authoritative guides for Christian communities to be read aloud along Jewish scriptures. In this regard they were well received. The earliest reference to such practice is offered by Justin Martyr at around the middle of the second century, that is, only about half a century after the completion of New Testament Gospels. Justin talks about reading the ‘memoirs of the apostles’ and the writings of the prophets in Sunday gatherings (*I Apol.* 67.3). However, not all churches accepted all Gospels. For a long time, several communities preferred to use one Gospel only (Kyrtatas 2010: 36–37). The most popular seems to have been the Gospel of Matthew, but Marcion notoriously only accepted his own version of the Gospel of Luke, whereas in Syria priority was given to Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, a harmonization of the four Gospels. Moreover, some anti-Montanist writers were reserved toward the Gospel of John or even rejected it because it gave a scriptural basis for the Montanist teaching of the Paraclete (Metzger 1987: 104–105, 150), and some early Christians were skeptical about the attribution of this Gospel to the apostle John.

The first author to clearly refer to a fourfold Gospel tradition is Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons at the end of the second century. In a polemical passage he argues that there must be four Gospels, not more nor less as ‘heretics’ claim, just as there are four winds and four zones of the world (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8). Irenaeus also links the four Gospels with the four living creatures in the book of Revelation (Rev. 4:7) which had a lasting impact on Christian art. Some scholars assume that the number of accepted Gospels was still debated and take Irenaeus’ argumentation as an innovation, while others see it as defense of a traditional position against those who want to either widen or narrow the number of recognized Gospels (Gamble 2002: 280). Be that as it may, it is clear that the fourfold Gospel became established in the second century. Other authors who bear witness to a collection of the four Gospels include Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 3.93.1) and Origen (*Hom. Luc.* 1.2). Moreover, the earliest manuscript containing all four Gospels and the book of Acts (P<sup>45</sup>) goes back to the first half of the third century and Tatian’s Gospel harmony, composed in the latter half of the second century, also presupposes a fourfold Gospel tradition (Balla 2002: 379).

The four New Testament Gospels by no means exhaust the number of early Christian Gospels (Schröter 2016). Several other gGospels are known either through references to them in

patristic sources or through manuscript finds. Despite some attempts to give an approximate number of extracanonical Gospels (Baynes 2010: 94 referring to Charles Hedrick), any estimate remains conjectural, for several reasons. First, it is possible that several Gospels circulated under the same name. Thus, it is not clear whether the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Truth*, to which Irenaeus refers (*Haer.* 1.31.1; 3.11.9), were the same texts as those now extant in Codex Tchacos and Nag Hammadi Codex I. The only quotation of the *Gospel of Philip* in Epiphanius (*Pan.* 6.13.2–3) does not belong to the Coptic *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3; Hartenstein 2009). Second, sometimes the references may be confused or there are other reasons to doubt the existence of a particular Gospel. For example, it is uncertain whether the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, traditionally counted as separate Jewish-Christian works, were distinct from each other (Luomanen 2012: 83–144). A hotly debated text is the so-called *Secret Gospel of Mark*, which some scholars consider a modern forgery (Burke 2013). Third, it is not always easy to define which texts should be counted as Gospels. The title ‘Gospel’ was given to a variety of texts, many of which do not resemble the New Testament Gospels at all. For example, the *Gospel of Mary* recounts a dialogue with the risen Christ and Mary (who is most likely to be identified with Mary Magdalene; King 2003: 148), but most texts of the same genre do not bear a name of a Gospel (such as *Epistula Apostolorum*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *Apocalypse of James*, the *Book of Thomas*, the *Apocryphon of John* and many others; Frey 2015: 35–37).

Ancient Gospels can be classified in different ways (Frey 2015; Ehrman & Pleše 2014; Miller 2010). One is to group them according to how they have been survived: 1) Gospels that are known only through references or quotations in ancient sources (in addition to Jewish-Christian Gospels these include, e. g., the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which is quoted – and rejected – by Clement of Alexandria and also mentioned by some other early Christian writers); 2) Gospel fragments (such as the Egerton gospel, which consists of fragments of papyrus codex of an otherwise unknown gospel); and 3) Gospel manuscripts. Most of the texts in the last category have also survived only partially but in contrast to the second group, these are texts that can be identified.

Another way of grouping the Gospels is according to genre. Typically, three different Gospel types have been identified: narrative Gospels, sayings Gospels and dialogue Gospels. The more fragmentary a text is, the more difficult it is to classify it in any of these types. Apart from different infancy Gospels, which comprise stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood (on

these, see Bauckham's chapter in this work), and the relatively late *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also known as *Acts of Pilate*), which describes Christ's 'harrowing of hell' between his death and resurrection, not many texts stand close to the category of narrative Gospels and very few, if any, of them narrate more than just one phase of Jesus' life. The surviving part of the *Gospel of Peter* only includes the passion narrative but may have included other sections, too (Foster 2010; Henderson 2011).

More typically, several gGospels focus on Jesus' teaching. Perhaps the most significant of them all is the *Gospel of Thomas*, not least because its good claim for antiquity. The text is known partially in Greek (three papyrus fragments found at Oxyrhynchus) and almost completely in Coptic (Nag Hammadi Codex II,2). It is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, usually introduced by a simple formula 'Jesus said' but sometimes containing a short dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Some of the sayings have a close parallel in the synoptic material but others differ significantly from anything Jesus says in the canonical Gospels. Scholars have both considered Thomas to be earlier than the synoptic Gospels, introducing a more 'authentic' Jesus (Patterson 2014), and deemed it a later text, dependent on the synoptic tradition (Goodacre 2012; Gathercole 2012), but independent of John's Gospel (Dunderberg 2006). Despite its name, the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3) provides neither a story about Jesus nor a collection of his sayings; it is rather a collection of early Christian teachings, probably derived from various sources (Heimola 2011: 28–34; Turner 1997).

The dialogue Gospels focus on Jesus' conversation with one or more of his disciples. While this type of Gospel usually does not contain narratives about Jesus' miracles or other deeds, it often provides more context to Jesus' teaching than the sayings gospels. Typically the dialogue is set to post-Easter time and occurs between the risen Jesus and his disciple(s) who receives a special revelation not intended for everyone. The newly discovered *Gospel of Judas* is also a dialogue Gospel, even though the events described in it take place shortly before Jesus' death. Judas, the receiver of Jesus' message, is set apart from the other disciples – a feature the text has in common with the New Testament gospels. What is different from the New Testament Gospels is that Judas fares better than the other, totally ignorant disciples. Scholarly opinion is divided over whether Judas is seen as a positive figure or whether he is evaluated negatively after all (Scopello 2008; DeConnick 2009).

## **OTHER TEXTS: ACTS AND LETTERS OF THE APOSTLES, APOCALYPSES**

There is very little ancient evidence about the early transmission and circulation of the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is recognized as a sequel to Luke's Gospel in several early sources (the Muratorian fragment; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.14) but the two never appear one after the other in manuscripts or in canon lists. This indicates that they were perceived as two distinct works early on (cf. Acts 1:1) and that they were not copied together (Gregory 2003). It may also imply that the fourfold gospel tradition was established early. Even though the sequence of the four gospels vary in different manuscripts – the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark was popular especially in the West – there is only one known source where Luke's Gospel is placed as the last one of the four gospels (the so-called Mommsen catalogue; McDonald 2007: 387) and even here it is not followed by Acts.

Despite its name, the Acts of the Apostles offers very little information on most of the apostles – especially if 'apostles' are taken in the Lukan sense to denote the twelve disciples only. This shortage of information may be one of the reasons for the appearance of several works on the deeds and often also on the deaths of various apostles (Pervo 2015; Klauck 2008). Five major apocryphal acts of apostles, describing the adventures of Peter, Paul, John, Andrew and Thomas respectively, are generally dated to the second and third centuries and also other acts are known (e.g., *Acts of Philip*, *Acts of Bartholomew*, or *Acts of Xantippe*, *Polyxena and Rebecca*). Even though these narratives are similar to Hellenistic novels and could thus be treated as imaginative literature (see Richard Bauckham's chapter in this work), there is evidence that they were taken seriously among early Christians. For example, Hippolytus of Rome refers to Paul's encounter with a lion, reminiscent of a scene in the *Acts of Paul* (*Comm. Dan.* 3.29), Tertullian reproves women who teach and baptize according to the example of Thecla (*Bapt.* 17.4) and many of the accounts, particularly of the apostles' deaths as martyrs, were used in liturgical commemoration all through the middle ages (Rose 2009: 23–78).

The canonical book of Acts is often linked in manuscripts with the so-called catholic letters – pseudonymous writings ascribed to Peter, James, John and Jude (Grünstäudel 2016). Despite being called epistles, they are rather theological expositions than actual letters. The designation 'catholic' or 'general' denotes that they are 'universal' in the sense that they do not have specific communities or individuals as their addressees like the Pauline letters have. Exceptions to this rule are 2 and 3 John, the first of which is addressed to the 'elect lady'

(perhaps meaning the church itself?) and the latter to a certain Gaius. The epistles were already called ‘catholic’ by Eusebius in the fourth century (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23.25) who knew seven of them, presumably the seven later included in the New Testament canon. Eusebius also relates that the letters of James and Jude were disputed because ‘few of the ancients quote them’, and reports Origen’s uncertainty about the two short epistles attributed to John (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.10). Jude was known and used by the author of 2 Peter but otherwise it is rarely cited, as is also the case with most of the other catholic letters, too, apart from 1 John and 1 Peter. The latter two are frequently mentioned in early lists of accepted texts while the other letters appear only occasionally in them. While it is no coincidence that the letters eventually numbered seven, the collection was not fixed early – and this means that the extent of the canon remained unclear for a long time (Gamble 2002: 287–288). As we have seen, the great codices of the fourth and fifth century contain a greater number of letters, the *Epistle of Barnabas* in Sinaiticus and *1–2 Clement* in Alexandrinus. These, however, are placed after Revelation and not as part of the catholic letter collection. These and other early letters, such as the epistles of Ignatius, show that the letter format was a popular way of conveying early Christian teaching. Some examples are also found among Nag Hammadi texts, such as the *Treatise on the Resurrection* (also called *Letter to Rheginos*, NHC I, 4) and the *Letter of Peter to Philip* (NHC VIII, 2).

Early Christians also produced apocalyptic literature. This genre was popular both among Jews and Christians and any borderline between apocalyptic texts of Jewish provenance on the one hand and Christian on the other is artificial (Bauckham 2015). Christians cherished and transmitted many Jewish apocalypses, for example, the originally Jewish *Fourth Ezra* is best known (with Christian additions) as *2 Esdras* in an appendix of the Vulgate New Testament (where it was called *4 Esdras*; Knibb 2008: 173). The Revelation of John seems to have enjoyed wide popularity at first, especially among chiliasts (such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian) – but later it became disputed expressly for its millenarian ideas and its popularity among Montanists (Metzger 1987: 104–105). In a letter from around the middle of the third century preserved by Eusebius, Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria tells that some claimed Revelation was written by Cerinthus to promote the belief in the earthly reign of Christ and hence rejected it. For his part, Dionysius writes: ‘But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem. But I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every

part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words' (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.2–4).

Other popular apocalypses included the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Both are mentioned in the Muratorian fragment whose composer accepts the *Apocalypse of Peter* along with the *Apocalypse of John* but admits that not all allow its reading publicly. The list also treats the *Shepherd* approvingly but wants to limit its use to private settings because it has been written recently and, hence, does not belong to the authoritative texts of the apostolic age. However, the manuscript tradition shows an opposite tendency: there are no examples where the *Apocalypse of Peter* is copied together with other New Testament texts, while the *Shepherd* belongs to the New Testament canon of Codex Sinaiticus. Moreover, Irenaeus treats the *Shepherd* as scripture, quoting it with an introduction 'well said the scripture' (*Haer.* 4.20.2; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.7) and Clement of Alexandria holds it in high esteem (Batovici 2013). Only in the fourth century writers such as Eusebius and Athanasius show more ambivalence toward it, perhaps because it had become too popular with groups that those in power wanted to exclude (Nielsen 2012: 166).

## **WHO READ AND USED EARLY CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES?**

Scripture is not only about texts, it is very much about people and communities who grant the authoritative status of scripture to certain texts (Brakke 1994: 417; Brooke 2005: 99). Even though literacy was thinly spread in antiquity, acquaintance with scriptures was much wider, for texts were normally read out aloud (Gamble 1995: 2–10) and scriptures enjoyed a central place in community gatherings early on. On the other hand, the role and function of scripture in ancient Jewish and Christian communities should not be overemphasized. The primarily oral culture of late antiquity differed from the bookish, academic culture of present-day scholars which tends to give texts a constitutive role for identity formation. It is likely that other factors, such as rituals, homilies, and sacred spaces were at least as important in the life of early Christians (Stern 2012: 15–30; Nicklas 2016).

Liturgical setting was crucial for the selection of scripture; in several fourth century sources, a distinction is made between texts that are acceptable for public reading and other texts, some of which are approved for other than public use and some of which are rejected. Which texts belonged to which group, varied. Eusebius, for example, reports different opinions concerning

Revelation (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.2, 4) and lists disputed writings that ‘are read publicly by many in most churches’ (3.31.6). He also tells about the intriguing case of the *Gospel of Peter* and its fate in the Christian community of Rhossus at the turn of the third century. According to a letter of Serapion, the bishop of Antioch, he first approved of the reading of the *Gospel of Peter*, a text previously unknown to him. Later, however, he learned that some community members had become to entertain ideas which he deemed heretical. This prompted him to familiarize himself with the text after which he denounced it for containing false teachings and being falsely ascribed to Peter and rejected it (*Hist. eccl.* 6.12.3–6).

Public reading in a liturgical setting was not the only context where scriptures were read. Texts were also used for private edification, sometimes also for entertainment (Bovon 2015; Gamble 1995: 231–237). Private reading took many forms. For example, in addition to approved canonized (*kanonizomena*) and dismissed apocryphal texts (*apokrypha*), Athanasius of Alexandria also lists other books which are not included in the canon but which one can – and should – read. These texts include the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which Athanasius recommends particularly for catechumens (*Ep. fest.* 39). In all likelihood this kind of ‘private’ reading still took place in ecclesiastical communities. On the other hand, homilies and theological treatises contain exhortations to read scriptures at home, which reveals that the addressees were the literate elite, few in number. Another important context for reading and interpreting scriptures was formed by study circles or schools gathered around a teacher figure, such as Justin Martyr and Valentinus in Rome, and Clement and Origen in Alexandria. It is likely that these intellectual Christians were not particularly eager to delineate scripture closely, ‘for one who knows how to search properly may find the truth in almost any document’ (Brakke 2012: 403).

Naturally, at least some of the texts that authors such as Eusebius or Athanasius rejected as apocryphal and heretical were also written for a readership. Who read these texts and did they regard them as scripture? Judged from the hostile reports of some patristic writers, we can conclude that these texts were deemed authoritative by their readers. For example, Tertullian disapproves of women who follow ‘the example of Thecla’ (*Bapt.* 17.4), which indicates that these women knew the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and, unlike Tertullian, highly esteemed it. Clement of Alexandria polemicizes against Julius Cassianus and other ascetic teachers who used the *Gospel of the Egyptians* to justify their encratite views (*Strom.* 3.9.63–66; 3.13.91–93). What remains unclear, however, is what other texts Cassianus and others read besides the

*Gospel of the Egyptians*. Was this Gospel meant to complement or to replace other texts, such as the canonical Gospels? (cf. Hurtado 2015). The questions related to the possible readership of such texts is virtually impossible to answer since most of these rejected texts now stand so completely out of context. Most of them are known only through one or very few manuscripts in later translations. We do not know who produced them and to whom, or how they were used and transmitted. Sometimes it is not even certain where the manuscript was found.

Interestingly, some texts are explicitly entitled apocrypha, that is, ‘secret books’ (e. g., the *Apocryphon of John*; the *Apocryphon of James*). Others open with an emphasis on secrecy: ‘These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke’ (*Gospel of Thomas*) or ‘The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot’ (*Gospel of Judas*). This evokes an impression that such texts were not meant for public reading but were intended to those who were more advanced in their faith. Such a scenario does not have to imply esoteric, secretive communities but a basic division between newcomers and those who have progressed further in faith and learning. A fascinating point of comparison is offered by Athanasius who recommends non-canonized texts expressly for newcomers.

Texts were also used as ritual artefacts (Uro 2013). The notion of holiness in relation to scripture gave rise to the magical use of scriptural texts (Bremmer 2010: 352). More than twenty late antique amulets written on papyrus or parchment with excerpts of New Testament texts have been found (Jones 2016). In addition, amulets were written on wooden tablets and ostraca. They may have had ritual functions in invoking the divine for healing or other favors, or they may have been worn for protection, or both.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS: CANON FORMATION AS PART OF INTER-CHRISTIAN POLEMICS**

Our discussion has shown that the question of what constituted scripture in early Christianity is broader than tracing the development of the canon of the Christian Bible. Even though the scriptural status of certain central compositions (e.g., Torah and the prophets, Paul’s letters) is an early phenomenon, the explicit canonization of scripture happened much later. Several catalogues listing recognized (*homologoumena*) or canonized (*kanonizomena*, *endiathēka*) texts appear in the fourth century (McDonald 2007: 445–450; Hahnemann 2002: 412–415). These lists show simultaneously a wide agreement and considerable variation: while most of



the texts listed are the same, none of the lists are exactly identical. Determining what texts should be regarded as authoritative and rejecting others was closely linked with struggles over what constituted true Christianity. Several of the lists contain explicit polemics against groups that were deemed heretical. Thus, the Muratorian fragment (which some scholars date to the end of the second century while others argue for a fourth century date; cf. Verheyden 2003; Hahnemann 2002) is aimed ‘against Marcion’s heresy’, and Eusebius and Athanasius wish to distance themselves from ‘the inventions of heretics’ (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.7; *Ep. fest.* 39).

It is customary to speak about criteria of canonicity according to which texts were either accepted or rejected. Such parlance easily entails a false impression as if a council or a committee scrutinized each text and decided its status. In reality, most of the texts that became included in the canon already enjoyed a scriptural status when debates over the inclusion and exclusion of texts intensified in the fourth century. Different authors appealed to different criteria, such as apostolicity, antiquity and catholicity but all of these were far from absolute. A text’s claim to apostolicity did not suffice; for example, the *Gospel of Thomas*, supposedly written down by the disciple Didymos Judas Thomas (Gos. Thom 1), was not accepted, and charges of forgery were made against several texts that went under the name of an apostle. On the other hand, texts written by alleged companions of apostles (Mark, Luke) were included, as well as others of unclear authorship (Hebrews). Similarly, while antiquity was taken as a guarantee of apostolic origin, it is clear that some texts included in the canon (2 Peter) are later than some that were excluded (1 Clement). The criterion of catholicity was also flexible, as the variety in the lists of canonical books shows (McDonald 2007: 433). There is very little evidence of any wide use of texts such as Philemon, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John – both in antiquity and in the present (Nielsen 2012: 164–165). It seems, then, that what mattered in the end was whether a text was considered to represent orthodoxy – and here opinion was sometimes divided. Moreover, ‘orthodoxy’ was not a monolith but included an array of ideas, as the different emphases of accepted texts show (Baynes 2010: 93). In many cases, discussions about the limits of the canon were reactions to already existing situations and their main purpose was to restrict the use of texts deemed inappropriate (Schröter 2013: 335).

The discussion about the exclusion and inclusion of texts in the canon almost exclusively concerned New Testament texts. The Christian Old Testament consisted of the available Greek translations of Jewish scriptures. The Torah was translated into Greek as early as the third century BCE, further emphasizing its early importance, other compositions only

gradually during the following centuries. Rabbinic Judaism abandoned the Greek translation in the second century CE whereas Christians continued to use it as their scripture (Aejmelaeus 2012).

The role of the community was essential in the canonical process. Texts, whatever claims they make, need people to authorize and canonize them. And although 'canon' as a social construct can gain elevated status and thus legitimacy, its actual power to influence communities is pragmatic and tested in practice. The interrelatedness of authority, legitimacy and power is reflected in the problem of 'canon inside the canon', where, after the closure of the canon, certain texts end up having more actual power and importance than others. It seems that inside the canonical collection the actual authoritative status of a text can change over time, although its legitimacy as a canonized text remains the same. Another important factor has to do with interpreting texts: both before and after the closure of the canon the interpretation often ends up having more actual power than the 'authoritative' source text as such.

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